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A Thoughtful Discourse on Sexuality Education: A Review of The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture.

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Abstract

The present article reviews Carlson and Roseboro's (2011) *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture*. The book analyzes factors that influence the sexuality curriculum within today's heteronormative culture, and it is particularly useful for teachers, school administrators, and educators in training. Overall, this book thoughtfully raises awareness about the influences of heterosexist norms and homophobia within the context of traditional education systems.

Keywords

book review; heteronormativity; sexuality; youth culture; Advocacy

Although many states, municipalities, and institutions in the United States—and more broadly around the world—are taking steps to promote equality for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ), heteronormative influences, fueled by homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, continue to oppress youth who violate traditional norms in an attempt to express and discover their true identities. Rather than embrace and support such self-exploration and education, many schools continue to advance a one-size-fits-all model of sexuality education that fails to address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth, while simultaneously exposing this demographic to discrimination and victimization. In response, Carlson and Roseboro's (2011) edited compendium, *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture*, seeks to challenge the present pedagogical establishment by highlighting injustice and offering insights into how educators in particular, and social/behavioral scientists more broadly, can respond to protect segments of youth that are marginalized by society.

This book will be of significant value to current and future teachers and administrators in junior and senior high school settings. Not only will those with a commitment to social justice and activism find the book to be an outstanding resource but we suspect that readers more broadly will find that the book promotes a greater understanding of how cultural forces (e.g., heterosexism, homophobia, hegemonic masculinity) shape the way children are educated. In addition, those who conduct social/behavioral research within the context of schools may also find value in learning about the theoretical underpinnings and ideas that influence how aspects of sexuality are addressed within our educational systems. Each chapter is structured in a similar manner with clearly articulated objectives and outlines of what is to follow; and overall, the book is richly infused and informed by theory and rigorous qualitative research.

The first section of the book, composed of four chapters, highlights the challenges, both historical and present, to providing well-rounded, inclusive, and affirming sexuality education. This section is followed by eight chapters that emphasize aspects of diversity (e.g., sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural heritage) with a unifying theme that highlights the social construction of sexual binaries and how this construction influences the educational experiences of youth. For example, Tema Okun and C. P. Gause's chapter highlights how classrooms can also be an opportunity to "teach queerly" (p. 54) and engage in productive discourse that builds critical thinking and deconstructs homonormative attitudes. From a reader's standpoint, this section is powerful because the authors provide an opportunity to reflect on normative school practices and how such practices are influenced by heterosexism and homophobia.

The second section of the text reviews heterosexism and privilege within the context of classroom curriculums. For example, Joe Wegwert's chapter documents the experiences of a high school gay-straight alliance (GSA) as its members attempt to navigate a curriculum of "compulsory heteronormativity" (p. 93). During the GSA's first Day of Silence event in particular, and generally over the course of the academic year, teachers and administrators struggled to maintain a "culture of compliance" (p. 104) in which adhering to heterosexual-dominated norms was considered an indicator of success. Ultimately, the absence of affirmation, support, and validation for the GSA resulted in the marginalization and victimization of LGBTQ youth and their allies. Wegwert's chapter highlights the importance of administrators and teachers supporting activities that are sponsored by GSAs. The absence of such support can be a detriment to the success and longevity of a school GSA (Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, [3]). As Wegwert documents, many youth may choose not to participate in GSA activities due to negative attitudes that can arise within a school when appropriate support from administrators and teachers is absent. Wegwert calls on school staff to challenge the culture of compliance and engage in dialogue surrounding privilege and oppression. The awareness of LGBTQ victimization as a result of heteronormativity will provide educators a unique opportunity to reflect on teaching practices and ways to engage in conversations that challenge current cultural norms.

Continuing this dialogue is a chapter by Pamela K. Smith that retraces the origins of high school proms, while highlighting how this supposed rite of passage is undoubtedly linked to, and fueled by, heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity. Smith documents how LGBTQ youth are marginalized by the spectacle of a prom and thoughtfully links this experience to those of racial minorities living in communities that once promoted segregation. Specifically, the chapter details the institutional racism, classism, and heteronormativity that once prevented African American and other low-income racial minorities from attending promenades and debutante balls. The "separate, but equal" (p. 157) experience that led to marginalization and isolation among racial minorities is reflective of today's environment for LGBTQ youth. The reader's eyes are opened to strikingly overt ways in which dominant cultural values are embedded within our schools.

A final chapter from the second section of the book adds to our understanding of the cultural norms within the sexuality curriculum. The chapter emphasizes the importance of gender diversity and the experience of drag kings in conceptualizing positive school climates. In this chapter, Leslee Grey documents the experiences of drag kings as they attempt to navigate the gender binary world around them. Grey highlights their self-revelations surrounding their gender identities and the struggle to suppress their identities in areas dominated by heteronormative expectations. Grey notes that safe spaces allow drag kings to explore gender and gender identity in a manner that is fluid, unstable, and always questioning. By allowing youth to participate in the "learning and unlearning" (p. 172) within safe spaces, schools encourage personal exploration of individual identity. Through the narrative experiences of drag kings and other marginalized groups, educators can begin to create positive environments that support individuals from all backgrounds.

The third section of the book is composed of five chapters that center on the depictions of adolescent sexuality in film. Although a specific emphasis on the experiences of LGBTQ adolescents is less prominent across these chapters, the authors do continue to document the pervasive influence of homophobia on adolescent culture more broadly. Notably, educators who wish to engage their students in discussions around homophobia, sexuality, and gender norms will likely find Shirley Steinberg's chapter particularly useful. Steinberg provides an opportunity for teenagers to deconstruct adolescent sexuality as it is represented in contemporary films. The chapter encourages positive and constructive dialogue surrounding homophobia and bullying through films such as *Mean Girls*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and *Footloose*. The author also reviews opportunities to address gender expression through analysis of popular media. Steinberg's analysis is accessible and timely, and will assist educators who hope to raise awareness among their students about the ways in which popular culture influences our understanding of sexuality and gender. The remaining four chapters of this section review the dominant gender roles within popular media. For example, Stephanie Troutman's chapter encourages discussions on the impact of race and class on cultural views of pregnancy and womanhood. Her chapter details the implications of feminist research and movies such as *Juno* in educating potentially sexually active teenagers. Overall, this section allows readers to brainstorm ways in which media can be used to encourage critical thinking surrounding sexuality and gender identity among adolescents.

The fourth and final section of the book, which is composed of six chapters, discusses how adolescent sexuality is depicted in literature, television, and on the Internet. Nicole Klein, Linda Markowitz, Laurel Puchner, and Jill Anderson address sexuality within their chapter pertaining to the public middle school literature curriculum and highlight the absence of nonheterosexual individuals and relationships. Although this section is brief, the authors thoughtfully address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth within a middle school setting; and from our perspective, this chapter highlights the absence of scholarship aimed at addressing the intersections of education, health, and sexual orientation at the middle school level. Klein and colleagues encourage teachers to analyze literature, identify hidden heterosexual messages within the text, and discuss the construction of sexuality within the classroom setting. In doing so, teachers can help challenge hegemonic masculinity, create a culture of inclusion for individuals of all backgrounds, and potentially prevent the bullying and harassment of

LGBTQ youth within middle school and high school settings. Generally speaking, very little is known about the experiences of youth who identify as LGBTQ in middle school settings, and as such, Klein and colleagues' chapter is a welcome addition to the text.

Throughout the text the authors highlight the importance of advocating for a more comprehensive and inclusive sexuality curriculum within schools. The chapters provide qualitative research that can support quantitative findings and efforts to influence policy and decision making at various levels. Several articles stress the need for safe spaces that would allow all students to engage in discourse around sexuality and gender. For example, Grey's chapter on drag kings emphasizes the need for safe spaces for LGBTQ students to learn and unlearn current gender constructs. Implementation of safe space programs is associated with positive psychological, physical, and academic outcomes for LGBTQ youth (Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, [1]). The text serves as a model for collaborating with individuals from a variety of educational and theoretical backgrounds to advocate for LGBTQ youth.

Although the book provides compelling information in regard to the current sexuality curriculum, the chapters may have benefited from the inclusion of social science and behavioral research. For example, Sharon Lamb's chapter provides a historical context and critique of abstinence-only programs. The chapter outlines the theoretical foundation behind abstinence-only programs, the limited scope of current sexuality curricula, and the cultural implications for our understandings of sexuality. The review also highlights the importance of self-reflection and critical thinking in teaching and discussing sex education. Despite the plethora of information provided by Lamb, she mentions little about the ineffectiveness and potential harm of abstinence programs (for a review, see Underhill, Montgomery, & Operario, 2007). Additional information in this regard may have served to support and further substantiate Lamb's critique. Other chapters in the book may have also been enhanced had the authors incorporated aspects of social psychological research (e.g., bias, intergroup differences, cultural empathy) in building their arguments for a more inclusive curriculum. Finally, the book does provide some concrete guidance to educators teaching sexuality education within schools. Yet it may have been also helpful to outline how teachers can engage in positive and productive dialogue to counter school norms. As Luschen's and Wegwert's chapters outline, many well-meaning teachers attempt to engage students in intensive dialogue that challenges current paradigms. Implementation of these conversations, however, can prove difficult. School staff and mental health practitioners can, therefore, benefit from strategies to tackle and engage in these sometimes-complicated conversations.

Overall, this exceptional book reframes sexuality curriculum in an effort to diversify the context and conversation in which it is delivered. We encourage every educator and educator in training to read this book and consider how they might challenge heteronormativity, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia within the classroom.

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